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"IF IT IS WRONG TO BE A MODERNIST,  
WHAT KIND OF A MODERNIST  
IS IT WRONG TO BE?"

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Charles W. Wendte

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"There is a charity as well as a zeal, which is 'not according to knowledge,' and on which, therefore, no reliance can be placed for permanently abating the divisions and harmonizing the aims of the Christian world. The differences of religious faith and feeling are beyond the handling of most accomplished good-humor. They lie very deep below the surface of thought and action.

"If controversy is ever to cease, it will not be by good natured indifference to all earnest conviction, but by a sympathy profound enough to understand it; by a charity, not of easy indulgence, but of genuine insight; by a full trust in the *under-truth* that feeds the roots of all our faiths. It does not consist in mere reaction from sectarian rigor; in dislike of all exact beliefs; in outcries against fanaticism and cold-hearted taste for 'moderation'; in turning the blind side of the mind to all that lies beyond the secular moralities. Real charity is not negative—a simple freedom from antipathies; but positive—a reverential sympathy with what is true and fair and good in the mixed products of our humanity, and through this, a tender allowance for the rest. It is grace of open eye. To feel charity towards a *sin*, you must understand the temptation; towards a *sorrow*, you must know its depth; towards an *erring creed*, you must appreciate its meaning and its ground."

—JAMES MARTINEAU.

**"IF IT IS WRONG TO BE A MODERNIST,  
WHAT KIND OF A MODERNIST  
IS IT WRONG TO BE?"**

We have thought it might be helpful to bring together for our consideration some of the Modernisms which are troubling the souls of the faithful. Since we too are called by this name it will help us to see just who our fellow sinners are, if this Modernism should prove to be a sin.

Modernism for our world was formally distinguished, defined and officially made of disrepute in 1907, when Pope Pius X in an Encyclical Letter brought together all that belongs under this name and condemned it. Whatever Modernism is, it is something that by 1907 was working in the oldest body of Christendom to such an extent that it received the notice of the head of the Church. Anyone who wishes to understand Modernism should acquaint himself with this document.

This Encyclical Letter says that the Modernist is a manifold personality; he is not one but many. He is a philosopher, a believer, a theologian, a historian, a critic, an apologist, and a reformer. As a philosopher, he "places the foundation in that doctrine which is commonly called Agnosticism." It says that God cannot be known by the human reason and that divine revelation cannot be made credible by external signs, but "that men should be drawn to the faith only by their personal internal experience or by private inspiration." Man has in him a religious sense, which is called religious consciousness and this is placed on equal footing with revelation.



This sense is the "origin of all, even supernatural religion, for religions are mere developments of this religious sense. Nor is the Catholic religion an exception." The mind working with this religious sense produces dogma which is not a fixed thing but a changing thing. "Thus the way is open to the intrinsic evolution of dogma. Dogma is not only able, but ought to evolve and to change." The modernist as a believer trusts to the personal experience of the believer. Tradition is just the original experience of those who lived before and is to be corrected by the experience of those who come later when this religious sense has evolved farther. On the relation of science to faith, the Modernist says both, that they are separate, cannot conflict one with the other, and that faith ought to be subject to science. There are representations of the objects of faith which are called symbols. Among these are the Sacraments which are signs, useful to give sensible expression to religion and to make an impression on the mind. The Scripture is the experience of those in the past, written under general inspiration such as the poets claim, but not under particular inspiration peculiar to itself. "They admit no inspiration in the Catholic sense." The Church is the collective conscience of all. This is the source of its authority. "In this way they pass to what is practically their principal doctrine, namely, evolution. To the laws of evolution everything is subject under penalty of death, dogma, Church, worship, the Books we revere as sacred, even faith itself."

After all are dealt with, it appears that Modernism is not a new thing but an old enemy under a new name. It seems that such were present in the New Testament times, "men speaking perverse things," "vain talkers

and seducers;" "erring and driving into error." Having reviewed all the phases of this multiple personality, the Modernist, the Letter concludes, "And now with our eyes fixed on the whole system, no one will be surprised that we should define it to the synthesis of all heresies."

The causes then are sought and it is found that the stream of Modernism cannot be good for the spring is bad. The immediate cause is error in the mind, and the remote causes, back of this, are two very old human traits, curiosity and pride. In the words of Pope Gregory XVI: "A lamentable spectacle is that presented by the aberrations of the human reason when it yields to the spirit of novelty, when against the warning of the Apostle, it seeks to know beyond what it is meant to know, and when relying too much on itself it thinks it can find the truth outside the Catholic Church wherein truth is found without the slightest shadow of error."

Now for the remedies proposed. The scholastic and theological studies having been slighted for the natural sciences, henceforth these shall be made the first of all studies for all who are to be priests. The rule laid down in 1896 for Italy, that clerics and priests shall not take courses in civil or non-Catholic universities that are given in their own, shall henceforth apply to all nations. Since Modernism comes from books, it shall be the duty of Bishops to prevent the reading of books on modernism and better to hinder their publication. "In all episcopal Curias let censors be appointed for the revision of works intended for publication." Since this trouble of Modernism spreads through priests getting together, as well as from books. "In the future,

bishops shall not permit Congresses of priests except on very rare occasions." "We decree, therefore, that in every diocese a Council of Vigilance be instituted without delay. They shall watch most carefully for every trace and sign of Modernism both in publication and in teaching, and to preserve it from the clergy and the young, they shall take all prudent, prompt and efficacious measures. Let them combat novelties of words, remembering the admonitions of Leo XIII: 'It is impossible to approve in Catholic publications a style inspired by unsound novelty which seems to deride the piety of the faithful and dwells on the introduction of a new social order of Christian life, on new directions of the Church, on new aspirations of the modern soul, on a new social vocation of the clergy, on a new Christian civilization, and many other things of the same kind.' Those priests who are found to be infected with Modernism, "Venerable Brethren, it will be your first duty to employ them only in the lowest and obscurest offices. The higher they try to rise, the lower let them be placed, so that the lowliness of their position may limit their power of causing damage. Examine your young clerics and when you find the spirit of pride among them, reject them without compunction from the priesthood." Here in 1907, by the head of the church is Modernism defined, discussed and dealt with. It is whatever is at variance with the truth as laid down by God, speaking through Christ, a part of the Godhead, and transmitted to Peter and to successive heads of the Church by whom it has been reaffirmed and clarified for each generation.

Now this is not the Modernism that we are reading about in the papers. This Modernism that is being dealt



with by this oldest church is no doubt being dealt with here in Cincinnati but the instruction was to deal with it in closed session. This church is not furnishing copy.

The Modernists we hear most about are all Protestants. The old church always told her erring child that she would have trouble some time, just the kind she is now in. The old church always said that it can not be expected that everyone will go to the book by himself and get just the right things. Protestantism now sees that this will not do. So Protestantism, said, "We ought to come together and agree what one should find in the book, and get out our encyclical letter against Modernism." They did. They met in Philadelphia a few years ago to decide upon what Modernism is by deciding what it is not. They decided that these are the four things that one has to find in the book to keep him from being a Modernist, called now the Quadrilateral of Belief. One in his reading of Scripture must find that it is an infallible book, that the deity of Jesus, the efficacy of the blood atonement and the second coming of Christ sometime, better if quite soon, are clearly set forth therein.

Here is a standard. Denial of anyone of these, makes one a Modernist. So Protestantism too set out to get rid of Modernism in her part of the Christian fold. It is harder to do because Protestantism has not a single head and her machinery is not so effective, but the general plan was the same. They too looked first to the seminaries, where the ministers are trained, to get the thing at the roots; to see who are tainted with this Modernism and to demote them or to put them out. Watch was set on the pulpits, especially the more commanding ones, to assure only those who are sound get-

ting a large hearing. Books, church papers, the Sunday School lessons, the foreign mission boards, all came under the closest scrutiny and were tested by these fundamentals of belief.

Now all this is their own affair. It is no immediate business of ours how Protestants discipline their intellectual rebels more than it is how the Catholic Church disciplines her priests. The Protestants went a little farther and we are interested in this. The Protestants said, "We will take another step to eradicate this Modernism, and we can, because there are so many of us now in this country. We will get the State to help us stamp it out." The Catholic Church, taking the only ethical and honorable course, said that they would pay for their own schools, and teach in them whatever they think safe and proper. Protestantism said that they could do it much cheaper than that. "We will let all pay for the schools and we will use them, if not to spread our belief, at least to prevent Modernism being taught in them." In the words of their peerless leader, "The hand that writes the pay-check, rules the schools."

Let us go to another church, the Protestant Episcopal, which is having its trouble with Modernism and see what it means to them. Those who hold the position in this church say that they are charged with these things: with making Jesus a myth, that is that he is not a historical character; with denying the supernatural, especially that part of it which is called miracles; with not believing that the Bible is without error, and with lack of intellectual integrity in using the creeds to say what they, as Modernists, are saying, and meaning when they say them what the creeds never meant to say. To the first two charges, that they as Episcopalian Modern-



ists think Jesus a myth and that they take all the supernatural out of religion, they answer that their critics are confusing them with others of this name, some radicals, who do think Jesus not a historical character. They say that they believe in the historicity of Jesus, as they do in the historicity of Napoleon, as much so as do their disturbed brethren. Religion, they think, is about all supernatural, although they think superhuman is the better word to use. What their critics mean to say is that they doubt the miracles. The difference seems to be that their more orthodox brethren say that they ought to believe in miracles on the word of the book which says only what is true. The Modernist Episcopalians say that they believe in the possibility of miracles, but they will look into the evidence for each particular one. The book is just evidence to be considered. For example, the virgin birth and the resurrection of the body, what did "virgin" mean in their language and what did "body" mean? Are the accounts mixed? Was something put in, left out, mistranslated? All such things they will consider.

They say that those who wrote the creed used the words, creation, descent into hell, ascension, resurrection of the body, in the sense in which they understood them at that time, and with the special errors in mind which they were combating at that time. These words, they insist, are not understood that way now by "educated" people. So they say that the more orthodox Episcopalians repeat the creed, in conscience, meaning what these words meant in the second century, and they say the creed, in conscience, meaning what these words mean in the twentieth century. Whether this is a good thing to do or not, we are not

discussing here. We are trying to see the difference in their own minds between them. They think too that most of these things which are hard to believe are not very important and their orthodox brethren think they are. They are in the book and they ought to be believed whether they are hard or not. It is more credit to believe a hard thing than an easy thing.

It seems that both want Jesus to be a perfectly sinless creature, but they get him that way by different methods. The orthodox Episcopalians get him that way by keeping him away from original sin at his birth. They have him born of a virgin. The Modernist Episcopalians say that original sin is a myth to us now, so Christ can be sinless though born in the ordinary way. They see no need now theologically for the virgin birth after original sin is out of the way, so it does not matter to them much which way it was. The virgin birth would simply be interesting as a freak of nature.

The Presbyterian Church is having its trouble with Modernism and they have just decided that adherence to these keep one from being a Modernist: the infallible Scripture; the Deity of Jesus; the atonement, the miracles and the bodily resurrection. Denial of any one of these puts one with the Modernists. Men, it seems, have slipped in now and then who did not know just what they did believe about the virgin birth. The decision is that a good Presbyterian, at least in the pulpit, must know what he believes about this and know that he believes it.

We have tried to get from the lips of those who speak for the Modernists in the Presbyterian Church just how far they wish to go in their Modernism. Those speaking for them use these words: "We are contending for

the sole sovereignty of Christ in the church. In the man Christ Jesus we have seen God incarnate; now we cannot think of God apart from Him. We are a Scriptural Church. It is the only infallible rule of faith and practice, but this does not mean that the whole Bible is on the level of Jesus. There is no minister in the Presbyterian Church, so far as I know who does not acknowledge the Bible as the authoritative self-revelation of God; who does not worship Jesus Christ as God incarnate, who does not believe that he suffered for our sins on the cross, and who does not own Him as risen from the dead. We cannot say too emphatically that Presbyterian liberals stand for the spiritual authority of the Bible, the Deity of Jesus Christ, for His vicarious sacrifice on the cross, and for the triumph of Jesus over death." The point seems to be that since Jesus laid down no particular theory about the inspiration of the Bible, or the method by which he was born into the world, or just the physical character of the resurrected body, or just the theory of the atonement, that these are not essential. The Presbyterian Modernists claim a little latitude on their theories about these things. This seems to be the conflict between them and their brethren who say that these things, too, are not subject to private interpretative but are set forth in Scripture as clearly as the doctrines with which the theories are associated.

We have noted three kinds of Modernism in three different Christian folds. When they use the word Modernist to explain themselves, and to show that they are not so bad after all, they use it to distinguish themselves from two other groups within their own bodies,



the Fundamentalists and the Traditionalists, and from Unitarians outside them all.

Here we are as a church going under the same name. They do not mean as Modernists what we mean. They say they do not and when we get what they say, we know they do not. Take this statement of ours, "We believe in God whom we reverently name our Father." They would say that this leaves out the Incarnate part of him, his Son, and the communicating part now, the Holy Ghost. "We believe in the soul, the life of God within us through which we are called to righteousness and through which we know that we are heirs of God and of immortality." They would say that this is not Christianity but Emerson, that it is Christ who calls to righteousness and it is through the God in Him, and not through the God in us, that we reach God and are heirs of immortality. "We revere Jesus of Nazareth as one man true to the best which is in all men." This is not their Modernism, which says that Jesus is not just the greatest of our kind. He is a different kind. He is related to God and to man in an entirely different way. He did something to God and for man which no other person ever did or could do. He was, is now, and always will be in different relation to God from all other persons. No quantity or quality of relationship to God, attained by any person or all other persons, can ever be this relationship. It is a different kind with only one of the kind. He is God incarnate as we are not.

Whether they use atonement in an old sense or a new sense, it means getting man at one with God. Atonement means getting those together who are separated. Atonement, if it means anything, means

curing an estrangement. Whether we are right or wrong about it, we do not use atonement, or vicarious, or deity, in connection with Jesus. Though we give honor, reverence, and a high degree, even the highest degree, of devinity to Him, many would crown him as the highest of all created beings, we should never think of the God of the universe being all incarnate in a historical person, or of this God being reconciled to man, or of death being conquered by a historical person, on this little planet, however high or excellent. We do not use these terms because we do not think the thought which these words always imply.

We have considered four kinds of Modernists. We come to another kind which says that all these are not Modernists at all, neither one of them. All of these talk about God, the soul, the spirit of man, about a revelation of God in a supreme person, a book, or in each individual soul, and of immortality. They say, "All of you Modernists, even you Unitarians, you all talk about these things. You talk about a great Orderer, of a great purpose, of things all working together for good; of this good winning sometime; of you yourselves winning; of your life being cared for and preserved beyond this earth by some power which is interested in you, is good, is love, and all that." These Modernists say that they are not bothering about whether God reveals himself in Christ, or in the Bible, or in the soul, for, these differences mean nothing to them because there is no God to reveal himself in any way. All these other Modernists are wondering whether souls are going here or there, to a good place or to a bad place. They are not worrying about this, they say, for there is no soul to go any place and there is no evidence of

any place to go if there were souls. All the religious Modernists, as well as the orthodox, are talking about helping the great purpose. They say one is just as out of date as the other, for there is no evidence that this world has any purpose. It is just a world of chance and force which stumbles into whatever happens. It does not know us, has no care for us, or for our values. It will freeze or burn us off this globe at last without caring or even knowing it has done it. There are no values that endure so we represent no enduring values. Read "The Worship of a Free Man," or almost any book now by the fully emancipated from all error about God, the soul, immortal values, and eternal hopes, and, though one is the freest of the religious Modernists, he will feel that he is as ancient as Methuselah. They say that the only difference between these religious Modernists and those with whom they differ is that the orthodox believe a little more of the same kind of wrong things. Both alike talk unreality and superstition when they say God, soul, and eternal spirit. These are the Modernists who claim the name. They do not interpret these things differently. They do not interpret them at all. They discard them.

We are not so much concerned about saving religion from the orthodox or from the religious Modernists. Religion can survive the narrowness and the literalness of orthodoxy, it always has, and it can survive the freer interpretation of liberalism. It always has. These do not challenge religion or threaten its very life and its very possibility. The most that orthodoxy wants to do is to keep a world in which her values can be. We think she is needlessly concerned about much which does not matter. The Modernists want to keep a world in which



these same values can be. We should agree more nearly with them as to what can be safely dispensed with without threatening these values. The only kind of Modernism that we need be concerned about is that which destroys the foundation. The reality of a spiritual order and man as a spiritual creature are that foundation. With these as reality, it is no great matter whether it is said just as the orthodox say it or as the Modernists say it. If these are not reality, then it makes no difference how it is said, for there is nothing to say.

